

The Other Wheeler by **yozza**

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Summary: Everyone in Hawkins knew James Wheeler was a good for nothing, trouble making rebel with no prospects. He didn't care about anything that wasn't himself. He was rude, violent and disruptive. But when Will Byers goes missing, the people of Hawkins see a different side to James, a side that won't give up until Will is safe again. Coarse language, graphic violence and eventual slash.

1. Chapter 1

Well, I decided to make a full story out of my Stranger Things oneshot 'Remember' so this is going to follow the story of James Wheeler, thirteen year old middle sibling of Mike and Nancy. This will be largely canon compliant up to the end of season 2 since the only new character is a thirteen year old kid. Still, there will; hopefully; be some surprises along the way.

I'm British so if I mess something up when describing the American school system I profusely apologize. I did my best to research.

Warnings: Strong language in this chapter. Eventual violence and eventual slash.

Pairings: Lucas/Max (once she shows up), Mike/Eleven, Joyce/Bob, eventual Joyce/Hopper, Nancy/Jonathan, Nancy/Steve for a while too (poor Steve) and the main one: James/Will.

Er, I think that's everything. Oh and I unfortunately don't own Stranger Things. The only things I've created are anyone you don't recognize from the show.

Chapter 1- The Vanishing of Will Byers, Part 1

November 6th, 1983

E-Minor.

Then G. Then D, C, E-Minor and G. Then another C.

Into the verse; E-Minor again, then G, D, C. Em, G, C, G, C, D, G, Em and then A-Minor...

Wait. That didn't sound right.

James Wheeler frowned as he stopped strumming. Sighing, he leant forwards over his desk and scanned sheet of paper that had the lyrics and chords written on it. He'd gotten the progression right. Lips

pursed, he played the same chord again. Again, it sounded wrong. His tuning was off, he supposed. Holding the chord he plucked each string once and winced at the slightly too high sound the B string made. With another small sigh, he set about loosening the string to lower the pitch back to where it was supposed to be. He honestly hated his guitar as much as he loved it. It almost stung to admit that, even to himself. It was his pride and joy. But, in the end, James knew it was also a piece of shit. Given how relatively well off his parents were, it would have been easy for them to get him a decent replacement. Unfortunately, his parents hadn't exactly approved of his hobby. So a ten year old James had saved up as much pocket money as he was able and bought himself an old, cheap guitar from a second hand store.

While that had allowed him to practice his passion, it meant that the guitar wasn't exactly the best quality. The damn thing fell out of tune so easily. James sometimes felt so frustrated with it that he considered putting it through the wall; although that would probably just cause Nancy to get pissed at him again. She complained about the noise from his room often enough as it was. James couldn't imagine how mad she'd be if he knocked a hole through their shared wall with his guitar.

James rubbed at his eyes and picked the guitar back up again. He had been determined to learn this song ever since he first heard it live in Indianapolis back in '81, when his uncle had taken him to see his very first live show. His uncle had died later that same night; murdered in an alley. They'd never found who did it. He'd never really gotten around to learning the song until now, and while this fourth interruption in less than an hour had almost annoyed him to the point of giving up, he was dead set on getting at least the intro down to scratch before the night was over.

A small knock on his bedroom door and a quiet voice interrupted his musings. "Jaime?" he heard

His first instinct had been to scowl. His mother had often called him that when he was younger, as had both Nancy and Mike and the few friends he'd had back then. He hadn't minded it, then. Liked it even. He started to hate it when he was about nine. Incidentally, that was also the time he started withdrawing in on himself more and more

and he lost those few he'd ever been close to; not that anyone had noticed that pattern. Of course they hadn't. He had started to insist on people calling him by his actual name. It hadn't been hard; his Mom had been easy. Mike and Nancy had learned eventually. There was no one else he really spoke to in those days. Pretty soon 'Jamie' was almost never heard in relation to him.

There was a grand total of two people he allowed to still use it; or more accurately, insisted on using it despite his protests. Will Byers was one of them. So when his brothers best friend pushed open the door, the scowl was gone almost instantly, a warm smile on his face. Apparently he had a nice smile. Everyone said he should smile more often; he didn't really think there was much worth smiling at. Will; with his warmth and kindness and innocence all in spite of a shitty homelife; was one of a few things he reserved a true smile for. Joyce Byers, too. He made sure he was always respectful and polite to her; though it made her sound insane when she defended him against mostly true town gossip. She was already regarded among the town as something of a joke; hearing her describe the notorious rebel James Wheeler as polite and sweet didn't really do Joyce's reputation any favors.

"Master William Byers," he said in a fake posh accent. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Will rolled his eyes as he stepped into the room. His rucksack was slung across his back and he had a piece of pizza wrapped up in napkins in one hand. He placed the pizza on James' desk before flopping down onto the bed. "We're all heading home," he said, as James put his guitar back in it's place and sat down next to him. "I saved you some of the pizza, since you didn't come down for any."

There was a questioning lift to his voice. Wondering why James hadn't hung out with them as he sometimes did when Mike; his twelve year old younger brother; brought his friends over for a D&D campaign or a movie night or whatever other reason they had. James grinned and ruffled Will's hair, ignoring the younger boys slight scowl at the action.

"I ate earlier," he replied. "But thanks."

"What were you you playing?" Will asked, seemingly innocent. But there was a glint in his eye that James instantly caught.

James laughed "Not The Clash. Stop asking," he said, giving Will a friendly shove. He glanced at his brothers friend and put a thoughtful expression of his face. He brought his hands up and bunched the other boys fringe into a mess of wild spikes. "You know me and Tommy could probably make you look like an absolute rock star if you'd let us."

Will laughed and shoved his hands away "After seeing what that paint happy psycho did to your hair? No thanks!" He grinned and James smiled fondly as he recalled the infamous Rainbow Hair Incident of June '83. They had made a plaque for that, him and Tommy. It was at her house, hung on her bedroom wall. "Besides, my Mom would kill me."

"Joyce?" James scoffed "Nah. She'd tell you it was rad. And then kill me."

"Scared of my Mom?"

"A little bit, yeah," James replied instantly, grinning. It did sometimes seem strange to him that he had such an easy rapport with his brothers friend, especially when he didn't get on half as well with Lucas or Dustin. But, James supposed, there was only a year between them. The age difference wasn't massive and they had a natural camaraderie he rarely felt with people in his grade at school. It would feel more weird to ignore it than to acknowledge it.

"Then you'll know I've gotta go, or else I'll be late," Will prompted him, standing and securing his bag.

"I'll walk you out," James offered and began to lead the way to the Wheeler garage, where the kids had stashed their bikes.

"I know the way, Jamie," Will said but smiled and followed anyway.

James idly noticed that the door to Nancy's room was closed now, where it had been half open earlier. He doubted she'd gone to bed yet and a phone call with Barb didn't require closed doors. James would

have suspected she was sneaking out, but in his mind she was nowhere near cool enough to do that. That was his thing. More likely, high school jock, first class asshole and Nancy's little heartthrob Steve Harrington had probably snuck over and she'd allowed him into her room. Which wasn't really something he wanted to consider. He did consider ratting her out to their Mom, but by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs he'd decided it wasn't worth it. Still; it was something to use as blackmail the next time she did something to piss him off.

He gave his mother a casual, almost mocking, wave as he passed the kitchen, his small talk with Will not faltering once until they reached the garage where the other three kids were waiting.

"There's something wrong with your sister," Dustin was saying as the pair stepped through the door. Lucas was already getting on his bike while Dustin shoved a slice of pizza into his mouth with one hand while picking his bike up with the other.

"What are you talking about?" Mike asked wearily. Disappointed his night got cut short, James presumed.

"She's got a stick up her butt," Dustin answered and James laughed, drawing the trio's attention to him as Will zipped up his jacket and stood his bike up.

"That's what high school does to you, kids," he said in a put on knowledgeable and somewhat pompous impression. "It's a well documented fact, I'll have you know."

"Hey, James," Lucas said in greeting. Dustin mumbled something similar through his food.

"Alright, guys? So what has my sweet, charming sister done now, Dustin? And for God's sake swallow first,"

Dustin swallowed, grinned and then replied "I offered her the last slice of pizza. She slammed the door in my face."

James lifted an eyebrow but then his cocky grin slipped "And what was she doing when he spoke to her?"

"She was on the phone,"

"No Steve Harrington?" Dustin shook his head, a confused frown adorning his features. "Damn. Glad I didn't try a grass her up, then. That would have been embarrassing."

"Harrington?" Will asked

"Yeah, Nancy's been dating him for a few weeks. She's been a real jerk ever since,"

"Au contraire, my young friend, she's been a real jerk since she started Middle School and became 'too old to hang out with little kids'."

"What are you talking about? She's always been a real jerk," Mike argued as his three friends turned on their lights on.

"Nuh uh," Dustin disagreed instantly. Puppy love'll do that, James thought sardonically. "She used to be cool. Like that time she dressed up as an elf for our Elder Tree campaign."

"Four years ago!" Mike almost shouted as Dustin began cycling off.

"Just saying!" he called back, Lucas following shortly behind him with a simple 'Later'.

There was silence for half a moment. James leaned against the wall. Mike stood next to him, glancing after his friends as they began the journey home. James saw Will look over at them. He seemed to contemplate saying something, even opened his mouth to begin and then stopped himself.

"It was a seven," he said eventually. James knew it wasn't what he'd wanted to say, that much was obvious.

"Huh?" Mike turned to him

"The roll, it was a seven," Will said. James smiled slightly. There was the slightest hint of a blush on the younger boy's face. Mike still looked uncomprehending, though so Will elaborated "The Demogorgon; it got me."

James grinned. Then, glancing at the darkened path, thought about the route to Will's house.

"Hey Will, Mirkwood's pretty dark this time of night. You want me to ride to yours with you?"

"I'm not a little kid, James," Will snapped. Sort of. Will didn't really snap at people at all. The closest you got was a slight bite in his words when he was annoyed and it was usually so subtle it was almost unnoticeable. But James made him come close fairly often. He was the only one who could. Ironical considering he was simultaneously the one who could make Will laugh the most.

But this time he wasn't trying to provoke Will into an angry reaction. Of course, the stone-hearted James Wheeler didn't show such a compromising emotion as 'concern'. So he did what he always did; joked.

"Just worried is all," he said "Who knows what nefarious Ne'er-dowells are lurking about just waiting for a little lost wizard to wander along. Maybe even the Demogorgon; out there watching you right now, just waiting until you're alone,"

Mike shoved him and James barked out a laugh. Will looked at him and James figured there must have been something in his eye that belied his actual concern; though he would forever deny it if anyone ever accused him of actually having feelings; because Will smiled softly at him.

"I'll be fine, Jamie," he said before starting to move off, clearly looking to catch up with Dustin and Lucas. "Well, see you tomorrow."

James saluted jokingly.

"That's why he's my favourite," James said once Will was out of hearing distance.

Mike just rolled his eyes and started back towards the house. James grinned cockily. The lights above the garage flickered. James glanced up at them and frowned, suddenly feeling unnerved. He hadn't seen or heard anything, or at least he didn't think he had. He frowned and

stepped out onto the road a bit, glancing up and down the street and scanning the opposite side of the road. Nothing. Nonetheless the hair's on the back of his neck and arms stood on end. He felt the weight of an unending stare resting on him and he shivered involuntarily before scowling at himself. He was jumping at shadows and the cold. Even so, James couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling in his gut that something wasn't right.

"James?" Mike's voice called from the door and James jumped slightly and then mentally berating himself for acting like such a wuss "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" James called back and then, more quietly "Just a bad feeling,"

With that he turned and made his way back into the house, flicking the lights off as he passed the switch. He hesitated at the door, before locking it firmly and sliding the deadbolt on. No sense in taking chances, he supposed. He glanced around as he made his way through the house. His mother was cleaning up in the kitchen, telling Mike that no he could not stay up for another half an hour to read comic books and that he had school in the morning. No amount of pleading on his brothers part seemed to change her mind. His 'father' was sitting in his oversized armchair, staring absently at the T.V screen, slumped in his seat as though he had no energy at all. James' nose scrunched up in distaste at the sight. He started to make his way up the stairs.

"James, no more music!" he heard shouted after him and he had to close his eyes and take a deep breath to prevent himself from snapping something back. He wasn't in the mood for a long drawn out argument tonight. "You have school tomorrow too, so get to bed early."

"Yes ma'am," he drawled sarcastically. He fully intended to ignore her.

He got back to his room and it took him a minute before he realized that two things were very wrong with what he was seeing in front of him. Number one; his guitar wasn't where he left it. Number 2) His window was open.

"Hi Jamie!" a voice chirped from behind him.

James nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound and instinctively turned to throw a punch. His fist just met air and in the next second his legs weren't under him anymore. He hit his carpeted bedroom floor with a loud thud. His head connected solidly with the floor.

"Ow," he moaned and ignored the sharp shout that came from downstairs at the sound. He glared up at the figure sitting on his bed, his guitar on her lap. "How many times do I have to tell you not to break into my room?"

The grin the red-head sported as she replied was definitely mocking, James decided.

"If you didn't want me here, keep the window locked," she said, eyes practically glittering.

James rolled his eyes at her and stood up, taking the guitar from her and shoving it back into the corner non-too-gently. The girl; Bianca Tomlinson, red headed little spitfire with more balls than any guy in their class apart from him; and even that one was debatable. She was his only real friend. When he'd pushed everyone away she'd shoved her way in and refused to leave no matter how hard he shoved back. He came to love her for that. Once he accepted that she wasn't leaving and their friendship properly formed, they became famous pretty quickly. Between the two of them they had caused more trouble for Hawkins than the town had seen in the two decades prior to their birth. The Devils offspring some called them. The teachers called them 'those two brats'. To Benny, the big bear of a man that ran the diner on the edge of town, they were the Princess and that little bastard. James liked to think he loved them both equally.

"You do know that treating your guitar like that isn't going to make it better right?" she asked, lips pursed and an eyebrow quirked.

"It's a piece of crap. I'm mounting it on my wall soon as I replace it. Nearly got enough saved up for a new one. Next week maybe, if business is good. You heard anything?" James had been wanting a new guitar; one of decent quality; almost since he got his current one. His parents however, hadn't even wanted him to have the first one let

alone another. His mom seemed to think he should be playing sports or playing games like Mike instead of learning an instrument. She thought it was a waste of time. His Dad just didn't care enough about anything to ever get involved. So since there was no chance he'd ever get one as a Christmas or Birthday present and he didn't exactly get pocket money anymore; his parents didn't view his behavior as good enough to deserve it; he'd had to resort to...less-innocent means of making money.

"Not yet," the girl shrugged.

"Come on, Bi!" he complained "I'm going crazy in this town; I'm itching for a hit, for a fight, for something fun...for anything. Anything that's not fucking Hawkins. You got nothing?"

"Nothing that'll pay," she said, a downright evil smirk on her face "But I've got something kinda fun, if you fancy it."

James tilted his head questioningly. In response Bianca pulled her small, black backpack off and unzipped it, pulling out a large can of spray paint.

"I've got seven cans and they just put up a brand, spanking new 'Welcome to Hawkins' sign," she told him "I felt we needed to make our presence known to all who visit our illustrious town,"

"That sign's been up for three weeks, Tommy. Bit slow on the uptake?"

"Well we couldn't hit it straight away, could we? They were expecting us. We needed to wait until their guard was down," she explained excitedly and then shifted slightly "Plus I'm still getting heat from that last stunt we pulled,"

"You too?" James winced at the reminder. His summer had been non-existent after Bianca roped him into that crazy idea of hers.

"Yeah, kinds sucks," she said mournfully. "But it was funny as hell, though."

"My definition of funny doesn't involve being woken up in the middle of the night, dragged to an interrogation room and lectured on why

it's wrong to hack into a government facility to upload jolly rogers and pictures of a fat orange cat to their system," he drawled in response.

Bianca winced "Yeah, well, that's why we need to go old school and small scale again for a while. Besides, after that nothing else is gonna seem anywhere near as bad. So; are you in or not? We can hit up Benny's for milkshakes and pancakes in the morning..."

James considered for a moment. It was true he was still technically grounded for his parent in hacking Hawkins lab. His mom would be furious if she found out what he'd done and no doubt the big names in town would try to come down like a hammer on a nail if they redecorated their shiny new sign. That being said; he was bored out of his mind sitting in his room all day and just being in the house made his skin crawl. So summer had been pretty awful. He could do with some fun. His mother would likely never know; he'd gotten damned good at sneaking out over the last few years. The only reason he'd abided with his grounding this summer was because Bianca was also grounded and she actually respected her parents.

Plus milkshakes and pancakes at Benny's actually sounded pretty good.

Even if Benny would likely poison James' portion.

"If you need extra incentive..." Bianca said teasingly "I've also got this,"

She produced a small packet of a herb like substance from her jacket pocket.

James' eyes widened "Is that...?"

"Weed?" She asked, smirking in full force "Yup. Figured you'd be interested."

"Where'd you get it?"

"From Tyler,"

"Tyler? Tyler from 9th Grade? Brown haired jock Tyler?"

"Yep,"

"What'd you have to do to get that off him?"

"Ask me no secrets and I'll tell you no lies,"

"Gross!"

"Totally," she nodded "Are you in?"

James grinned "Of course I'm in," he told her before grabbing a jacket; a blue denim jacket lined with faux fur, a gift from Joyce, Jonathan and Will Byers for his thirteenth birthday. He'd hit a growth spurt about two months ago; half a year after his March birthday; and the jacket didn't really fit anymore. He wore it anyway. He opened a drawer on his desk, shoved some loose paper and old toys to one side and fished out a crumpled packet of cigarettes and an old lighter, shoving both into his pocket, before silently following Bianca out of his window.

The feeling he'd had in garage had never gone away and became stronger the second he left the confines of his home. He shoved the feeling to one side. He was going to have fun for the first time in months. Whatever creep was pacing over his grave could piss off.

On the other side of Hawkins; in a small shed behind an old, slightly run down bungalow; Will Byers stared up at the monster that had followed him home. The Demogorgon that had been waiting in Mirkwood for a lost Wizard on his own, just like Jaime had said. The rifle fell from his hands and clattered to the ground. As the monster advanced on him, a single name flew through Will's head and if Will had been capable of speech at that moment his last word in the normal world would have been that name screamed in absolute terror. It wasn't his mother's name. It wasn't his father's name. It wasn't the name of his brother or his best friend. Had he been given the time to process his thoughts and think about who he desperately wanted, it may well have been one of those names that he screamed as the Demogorgon got him. But it wasn't.

If Will Byers had the time for last words it would have been a call for 'Jamie!'.

Holy shit, I managed to create a 4k word chapter just with from the pre-title sequence scene of the first episode! I'm not sure if that's a good sign or a bad one?

Anyway, I hope anyone who reads this enjoys the opening chapter and will come back for me when I upload the next chapter. Those who read my story 'Remember' might be a bit more invested in James than those who did not but I hope I manage to create a likable character with over the course of this story.

Thanks for reading, hope you're kind enough to leave a review (they truly make my day) and I hope to see you next time. Cya around, guys!

2. Chapter 2

Mike's POV this chapter back to James' next time.

Disclaimer: Still don't own Stranger Things, obviously.

The Vanishing of Will Byers, Part 2

November 7th, 1983

Mike held back a yawn as he sat at the table for breakfast that morning. While still disappointed that they hadn't been able to finish their campaign last night, the annoyance he'd initially felt at his Mom for not allowing them a little longer was mostly gone. That didn't make him any happier to have to get up early for school though. Nancy sat next to him, looking as perfect as she always did. Mike rolled his eyes slightly. He couldn't bear the thought of spending so long on his appearance when there was so many more interesting things he could spend that time doing. His dad sat on Nancy's other side, a mug of coffee in one hand and a newspaper in the other, paying pretty much no attention to anything beyond those two items.

"James!" he heard his Mom shout up the stairs, her voice ever so slightly shrill. She didn't look happy, Mike thought. Then again, this was the third time she'd shouted him, so he supposed being annoyed was understandable.

After a minute without any reply or any sign of movement, his mom rolled her eyes and went back to counter where she was plating up the food. Mike returned to slouching in his seat, his fingers drumming against the table in boredom. He wasn't surprised James wasn't up. Then again, Mike also wouldn't be surprised if James really was awake and was just ignoring their mom to rile her up. Honestly nothing James did came as a surprise anymore; although he was slightly curious what that big 'incident' from summer was that had everyone in a panic. No one would tell him, or Nancy, anything. All he knew was that James had landed in a lot of trouble for it. Whatever it was, it must have been pretty bad, far beyond James and Bianca's usual pranks and troublemaking.

Mike sat up a little straighter as his mom put a plate of toast and scrambled eggs in front of Nancy; who wasted no time in picking up a fork and starting to eat, and shortly afterwards placed one in front of him before she turned her attention to feeding Holly. As soon as the food was in front of him, Mike reached over and picked up the bottle of syrup and began to pour it over his eggs.

"That's disgusting," Nancy told him with a grimace.

"You're disgusting," he shot back. He heard the phone ring.

"Hello," his mother said into the receiver.

Mike grinned slyly as he leaned over and quickly poured a generous amount of syrup over his sister's breakfast, drenching it before she could even move to protect it. He had to keep from laughing manically; as James had trained him to do years ago; as Nancy's face cycled through surprise, shock, disgust and anger in quick succession.

"What the hell, Mike?" she asked in outrage. Mike's grin never faltered as he put the bottle back in the middle of the table.

"Quiet!" his mom yelled, before returning to her phone call. "Sorry Joyce just one of those mornings."

"Language," his Dad said as Nancy turned to him, clearly expecting him to do something. Nancy's mouth hung open in astonishment; whether at his actions or their dad's inaction and disinterest, Mike didn't now. He knew it was funny though. Maybe that was why James always caused trouble. Mike had always admired James, but the past few weeks he'd realized that as far as Hawkins went James was pretty much the definition of cool.

He should probably never say that out loud though. Pretty much everyone just saw James as a nuisance. Bianca had a slightly better reputation, seeing as she got in far fewer fights than James, but Mike knew she was actually the one who usually goaded both parties into the fight in the first place.

"Will? No, no, no it's just Mike," his mother said. He presumed she was talking to Will's mom, though why she'd think Will was there

was a mystery. Mike subtly listened in on his mother's half of the conversation, ignoring Nancy's insults and idly returning a few of his own. "No he left here a little bit after eight. Why he's not home?"

There was silence from his mother for a minute before she said bye and put the phone down. She looked concerned when she turned around but she covered it quickly.

"Is he not up yet?" she demanded, even though the answer was kind of obvious. She sighed deeply and made her way over to the stairs, clearly intending on shouting up again.

Right at that moment, the front door clicked and was slowly pushed open. James stepped through carefully and then quietly closed it behind him. He turned and took half a step towards the stairs before he stumbled to a halt, his eyes widening as they scanned over the five of them. Mike's own eyes widened as well; sneaking out was new. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe he'd just never been caught before. Nancy grinned slightly and Mike could almost sense the laughter about to escape from her, that she covered by taking a bite of her food and promptly scrunching up her nose at the taste. She stopped grinning and glared at him again. He responded with a mocking grin. Apparently she'd forgotten about the syrup.

Their mom didn't look happy. She had one foot on the bottom step and the hand that wasn't holding Holly had come to rest on her hip. Her head was tilted ever so slightly and Mike could just picture the look on her face. Her lips pursed, a single eyebrow raised in question and her eyes furious. Glancing at his father, Mike saw only a mild interest as he looked up from the newspaper and his eyebrows lifted.

"Ah. Shit," James said.

"Hey. Language," came their dad's bland response.

"And just where have you been, James?" their mom asked. Nancy grinned again.

James' eyes flickered around the room for a moment, before coming to rest on their mother again.

"I," he started. "I...went for a run?"

Mike felt the urge to slam his face into the table. That was the best excuse the infamous trouble maker, pranker and trickster extraordinaire could come up with? By the way James winced as soon as the words came out of his mouth, he knew it was awful too.

"Running?" skepticism oozed from every word his mom spoke. "You went running? That's what you're going with?"

"I take it you don't believe me?"

"Try again, young man. How about the truth this time?"

James paused and seemed to consider this "How angry would you like to be by the time I'm done?"

"James!" she snapped.

"I was out,"

"Out?"

"Yeah,"

"Where?"

"Around. Didn't leave the town,"

"With who?"

"Bianca,"

"Doing what?"

"This and that." James shrugged.

"James Harrold Wheeler!"

James raised an eyebrow "Just a little...painting." He was grinning the 'James' grin again. A mixture of smug, amused and mocking all rolled into one. He grinned that grin a lot. It usually meant he'd done something he probably shouldn't have but was proud of it anyway.

There was sometimes also a hint of 'I know something you don't' in it as well.

Mike was certain he was about to watch his brother get eviscerated; or at least grounded for a long time; but all his mom did was sigh once more and say "You know what? It's too early for me to deal with you James. So I'm going to ignore this for now, you're going to sit down and act like you've done nothing wrong. We'll decide your punishment tonight after I inevitably hear about whatever vandalism you've caused this time. Deal?"

Mike could practically see the wheels turning in his brother's head before he grinned roguishly and said "Deal."

As he stepped around their mother and entered the kitchen, her nose scrunched up in disgust.

"And make sure you have a shower before school. You stink of smoke," she said. James acknowledged her with a half-assed salute. He'd been smoking for more than a year now and their Mom had stopped really trying to discourage it anymore.

Mike turned his attention back to his breakfast as the older boy opened the fridge, pulled out a carton of orange juice and filled a glass half way before replacing the carton in the fridge and carrying the glass to the table. He sat down on Mike's left and Mike flinched away from the heavy smell. His mother was right. James absolutely reeked. The smell was never usually that strong. Nancy's nose scrunched up and she gave James a reproachful look.

"Jeez, what'd you do? Smoke a forest fire or something?" Mike asked as he scooted his chair away a little.

James grinned "Just a little medicinal recreation, is all, baby brother," Mike scowled at the term. "It doesn't smell that bad does it,"

"It's awful," Mike responded with a scoff at the same time Nancy incredulously said "Weed? What the hell, James?"

"Language!" Their dad said once more, eyes back on the newspaper. All three turned to give him identical 'What the Fuck' looks. Mike

honestly wasn't sure what surprised him more. The realization that James was doing drugs or the fact that their father could instinctively respond to bad language but completely ignored the fact that his eldest son had moved on from small, mostly harmless pranks to smoking weed.

"James, that stuff's really not good for you," Nancy whispered harshly, trying not to draw their mother's attention.

James just rolled his eyes "It's not that bad. Don't be such a goody-two shoes Nance. It's just a bit of fun."

Mike could tell Nancy wanted to respond; she was gearing up for a rant and James looked all set to fire some cutting remarks and sarcastic quips of to interrupt her, but their argument was halted by their mother's voice.

"James?" Mike jumped and turned to look at his Mom. "Why aren't you eating?"

"I already ate," he said without preamble. "Bianca and I got pancakes at Benny's diner."

"I thought you said you didn't leave the town?"

"I didn't. Benny's is still in town...just. Kinda," their mom gave him a look. "Look, that welcome to Hawkins sign is further out than Benny's, so therefore Benny's is still in town."

Their mom sighed "I don't know why I bother trying with you sometimes, James,"

"I don't either. It got boring years ago,"

"James!" Nancy kicked him under the table.

"Ouch!" James glared and kicked back.

"Alright, that's enough. James if you aren't eating, go take a shower. Mike, Nancy; finish your breakfast's and then go get your things ready for school,"

With a dramatic sigh, James drained his glass and slid out of his seat, heading upstairs. Mike returned to his breakfast, eating slowly in attempt to delay the moment he had to go back to school. It didn't work. While his mom did delay his departure to inform them that Will wasn't at home that morning, but not to worry because he probably just left early, she hurried them off not long after, Mike's stomach now in knots out of worry for Will. All too soon he and James were pushing their bikes out onto the road, bags slung across their backs, as Nancy caught a lift from her friend Barb. James' hair was still wet and the older boy shivered slightly in the cool november air. He was dressed almost the exact same as he had been when he got in that morning; jeans, some band t-shirt and a red flanel shirt. If not for the damp hair, Mike would have suspected James' hadn't showered at all. That and the fact that the smell wasn't as bad anymore. If James didn't have a lit cigarette between his lips Mike doubted it would be there at all.

"So...sneaking out? That new?"

James grinned "Not really. Been doing it for a while now. Never been caught!" he boasted proudly.

"Until today," Mike pointed out and James deflated.

"Yeah, well, my watch stopped and I didn't realize. Thought it was earlier than it was and you'd all still be in bed," he said nonchalantly.

They were interrupted by a loud horn that made them both jump in fright and then James curse violently. They turned to the road, where a car was pulling up alongside them.

"Sup fuckers!" Bianca called as she leaned out of the passenger window so far Mike thought she might fall out.

"Language, Bianca," Mr. Tomlinson admonished fondly, before turning to the boys. "You kids need a ride? I know I'd prefer not to bike all the way to school in November,"

James grinned and instantly stepped off his bike. "If you're offering, Eddie!"

Mr. Tomlinson smiled wryly. "That's Mr. Tomlinson to you, brat," he said, kindly. "Throw your bike on the back and get in. How about you, Mike?"

"No thanks, sir," he said, as James fixed his bike to the bike rack attached to the back of the car. He climbed into the car, giving Mike a wave and accepting a fist bump from Bianca. "I'm meeting my friends and riding with them. But thanks anyway,"

Mr. Tomlinson nodded. "Fair enough, kid."

Mike carried on towards school as the car pulled away. He could see James and Bianca grinning and rocking out to some song or another and Mr. Tomlinson shaking his head amusedly as they went passed him. Mike rolled his eyes at his brother's actions and quickly crossed the road to join Lucas as he left his house. The pair biked over to Dustin's, who hurried out of the house five minutes late after racing around trying to make sure he had all his books, before heading towards the school. While riding, Mike filled his friends in on what he'd heard about Will. While both seemed concerned, they each shook it off and told him that Mrs. Byers was probably right and he had just left early. Mike wasn't so sure. Sure it wouldn't be the first time Will had gone in early for whatever reason, but it was just so unlike him to do it without telling at least him mom. But Mike shoved those thoughts away and made himself believe that he would see Will at the school.

The trio biked their way up the path to the school, passing the yellow school busses and crowds of other kids. Mike made sure to keep an eye out for Troy and James; a bully in his year, not his brother; the pair of asshole's that liked to pick on him and his friends whenever they thought they could get away with it. They had tried to knock one of them of their bikes in the past and Mike had no inclination to see if he could avoid such an attempt a second time.

When they reached the bike rack in front of the school, Will's bike wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere and Mike doubted Will would have walked, which was the only alternative if neither Jonathan nor his mom had taken him. The bad feeling came back with a force. Mike tried his best to ignore it and put his bike in the rack and stepped off, absently noting Lucas and Dustin doing the same.

Mike made a small show of looking around "That's weird. I don't see him," he was going for the really subtle tone of sarcasm he'd heard James use many times before. He didn't think he succeeded.

"I'm telling you, his Mom's right. He probably just went to class early again," Lucas said casually.

"Yeah he's always paranoid Girsty's gonna give him another pop quiz," Dustin said with a laugh.

Mike was about to snap at him for being so unworried when an unwelcome voice cut in. He practically stumbled to a stop and instantly wished he'd accepted the lift from Mr Tomlinson. Troy wouldn't do anything if James was around. He never did. He was too scared to.

But James wasn't there.

"Step right up ladies and gentlemen!" Troy said with a mean smile, his arms held wide apart like some sort of announcer "Step right up and get your tickets for the freakshow!"

Mike turned to face him, feeling resigned. The mixed look of boredom and apprehension that was on both his friends faces showed they were feeling the exact things he was. Mike was just hoping it would stay tame today. He knew he was about to be insulted and probably humiliated and most likely hit at least once but satisfied himself with the knowledge that Troy would get his own when James found out about it.

"Who do you think would make more money in freakshow?" Troy continued before stepping forward and slugging each of them in the shoulder one at a time "Midnight? Frog Face? Or Toothless?"

The younger James rubbed his chin in mock thought and made a show of looking at each of them in turn, eyes considering before he grinned. "I'll go with Toothless," he said in a mocking imitation of Dustin's voice.

"I've told you a million times, my teeth are coming in! It's called cleidocranial dysplasia!" Dustin argued; his teeth were a sore spot for

him.

"I've told you a million times..." James mocked again before scoffing and exchanging a glance with Troy.

"Do the arm thing," Troy commanded.

Dustin shook his head.

James glared "Do it, freak,"

But just as Dustin sighed and made to take off his jacket, there was suddenly movement behind Troy. Mike just barely caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye before he was forced to move to the side to avoid being flattened as Troy was sent sprawling to the ground by a hard shove from behind. Mike really thought Troy should have chosen his location better. Out in the open, in front of the school, everyone could see him tormenting them. Including a very easily angered older brother Mike had. The younger and less cool James took a nervous step back as the older James adjusted his jacket and stepped forward, planting a foot on Troy's chest to keep him pinned to the ground.

"Beat it, kid," James said and the bully took off running. Mike pushed down the disappointment that everyone saw James as someone to be feared whereas they saw him as a target. He should really just be glad James stepped in before things got bad.

James glared down at Troy and Mike was aware of people coming to a stop and excitedly staring at the scene. Mike glared at them; more interesting in watching James beat someone up than they were in stopping to help three kids when they were being picked on.

"So," James said threateningly "You're one of the idiots that thinks picking on my brother is a good idea? Pretty sure I warned you about that a few times before. How many times have I dealt with this little prick, Tommy?"

"Three times," Bianca said from a few feet away.

"Three? Oh it's so not your lucky day, asshole," James chuckled before grabbing Troy by the lapels of his jacket and hauling him to

his feet. Mike thought his classmate looked particularly pale. "You see, I'm not really known for my patience. But you're littler than me so I thought I'd be fair. But three strikes later and you still haven't got the message? Guess I need to leave a stronger impression."

He got in close and Mike, one of the few close enough to hear, heard the growl in his brother's voice "Stay away from my brother. Stay away from his friends. Don't look at them, don't talk to them, don't be seen near them," and with that, James released his hold on the boy, who practically sagged with relief. James took a step away and made to turn away. The crowd murmured and began to disperse and Mike felt disappointment well up in his chest.

"Oh and to help you remember..." James said. He stepped in close again...

...and slammed his knee up between Troy's legs. Hard.

The other boy shouted in pain and crumpled to the ground, small tears slowly escaping from his eyes. The crowd of kids watching them winced and gasped and backed away a little more. The boys looked particularly uncomfortable. James raised an eyebrow at them before planted a foot on the back of Troy's neck as the boy tried to push himself to his knees.

"If I ever see you lay hands on my brother again you will find out what I'm like when I'm *really* pissed. And we wouldn't want that, now would we?" he asked, his tone and expression kind but his eyes anything but. Troy didn't answer, so James forced his head a bit closer to the ground "I said 'would we?'"

"No," Troy gasped, voice laced with pain "We wouldn't,"

"Good," James chirped, before giving him one last kick in the side, sending the bully back to the ground "Glad we understand each other. I trust no one here will be mentioning any of this to the teacher's? I'd hate to have teach more than one lesson today,"

The circle of students mumbled quietly but generally consented, so James smiled widely; with what Mike liked to call "Shit-eating grin number twenty-seven" plastered on his face; and strode towards the

school, throwing his arm around Mike's shoulders as he did, tugging the younger boy after him.

"You alright baby brother?" James asked in a revolting and mocking sing song voice.

Mike snarled "I don't need you to fight all my battles for me, James!"

James just kept grinning and nudged him with shoulder "Just the big ones, right?" he winked, before throwing his arms out dramatically "Don't worry kid. Not everyone can be as charming, ruggedly handsome and awe-inspiringly badass as I am. I wouldn't worry about it. I'll stick to what I'm good at; like just being awesome; and you stick to what you're good at; like being one of Mr Clarke's golden boys. Anyway; later Mike!"

With that James stopped pulling Mike and swaggered off to his class, with Mike taking a moment to realise he was now outside Mr. Clarke's class. As Mike watched him leave, he realized that in that moment; like so many moments before; he hated his brother. Hated that he wasn't ugly, even if he wasn't exactly good looking. Hated that he was so effortlessly cool. Hated that he could do what he liked and ignore the consequence's. But more than that Mike hated that he himself wasn't James. He hated that people would never look at him with the same awe and respect and hidden admiration that filled their eyes when they saw James do something stupid.

Lucas and Dustin stepped up next to him.

"Your brother's awesome," Dustin said.

"Yeah. Awesome. Scary as hell; but awesome!" Lucas agreed.

Yeah, Mike thought bitterly as the bell rang. *My brother; the scary badass.*

So this chapter was meant to switch to James' pov halfway at this point and continue up until the search for Will. But work got the better of me and I didn't have time to finish it. But I wanted to put something out, so I split the chapter into two. The

rest of what should have been chapter two will be up sometime in the week; ideally; and then I won't be writing until after Christmas.

I think that's everything, so please leave a review; I adore them; and I hope I see you next time.

3. Chapter 3

Whew! That one took a while. Partially because I struggled to write it (some scenes still feel a bit rushed and I'm not sure it really flows as well as the last two and the one-shot did) and partially because I just couldn't find time to write it.

But yeah; I'm still alive and the story is still going.

Disclaimer: Still don't own Stranger Things, obviously.

The Vanishing of Will Byers, Part 3

November 7th, 1983

It was noon when they came for him.

James paused his thoughts. That sounded far too dramatic even for him. It was fairly accurate though. After a relatively unstressful morning of snarking of to his teachers, half heartedly pretending to do work and swapping friendly insults with Bianca, James had been absently watching the seconds tick by on the clock as lunch inched closer. He'd probably end up just sitting behind the school with Bianca in their usual hangout, smoking and taking the piss out of each other and anyone else unfortunate enough to cross their path. He'd probably be bored out of his mind and he'd honestly considered just ditching the rest of the day, but ultimately decided not to. He'd end up in enough trouble when his and Bianca's 'decorations' were discovered and didn't really want to have the Principal breathing down his neck at the same time. Besides; maybe something interesting would happen. If nothing else they could see if they could make that Troy brat piss himself in fear.

Something interesting did indeed end up happening. The bell had been only a few minutes away from signaling the beginning of their midday hour of freedom when James was snapped back to reality by a knock on the door. He looked up to see one of Hawkins two deputy police officers; specifically Officer Powell, the more competent of the two; opening the door. His eyes widened. He honestly hadn't

expected any repercussions this soon and not in the form of the police actually collecting them from school. Not for a bit of graffiti. He turned his head to lock eyes with Bianca a few seats behind him, lifting an eyebrow in question. A small, barely noticeable shrug was the reply. Almost synchronized the two of them reached for their bags. It was almost impossible that this would be for anyone else.

"Sorry to interrupt ma'am, can I borrow James Wheeler, if you don't mind?" Powell said. James frowned. Just him? Looking behind him, Bianca looked about as confused as he felt. Nowadays it seemed to be common practice to just assume that both of them had been involved in whatever it was that was being investigated.

The teacher sighed "He been causing trouble again, Officer?" she asked, distaste very clear in her tone. James scrunched his nose up. *Well fuck you too*, he thought, *I'm not so fond of you either*. James had rarely had a teacher that liked him, but he and Mrs.. Graves had practically been at war since he found himself sentenced to her classroom. It probably didn't help that she'd used to live down the road from the Wheeler's, and had been one of his mortal enemies even then.

He still denied poisoning her garden with a deadly combination of his Mom's awful soup (that they all 'loved' whenever she made it), copious amounts of his dad's whiskey, cooking oil and Nancy's perfume. Definitely wasn't him.

"I really can't say, miss," Powell said evenly, eyes scanning the classroom. When they landed on him, Powell gave a small nod of greeting before inclining his head toward the door, indicating for James to go with him.

Sighing, the teen pushed his chair back (and if it squealed along the floor a bit, and if Mrs. Graves winced at the sound, well that couldn't be anyone's fault now could it), stood and slung his bag across his back before making his way to the door.

"Whatever it is, I didn't do it and you can't prove I did," he quipped. There were snickers and muffled laughter coming from his classmates. Whether at his; frankly, quite weak; attempt at humor or at the fact that he was being spoken to by the cops again he couldn't

tell. He rolled his eyes and glared at them a little. He didn't really care. About why they were laughing, not about his classmates in general. Although he didn't care about them either. Much. Beyond hating every single one of them with every fiber of his being. And a select few of them a good bit more than that, he thought bitterly, his eyes catching sight of Alex Taylor and Caleb Swift.

"You say that everytime but we always do," Powell said and James could easily detect a hint of fondness in his tone.

Powell stood aside to let him pass as the lunch bell rang and the class began hurriedly gathering their things. James stepped into the hallway. One of the secretary's was waiting there. She'd probably been the one to lead Powell to the classroom. She was giving him a disapproving stare. He ignored it and turned to the display that was set up along the hallway, pretending to be looking at it, and exhaled, trying to squash the slight bit of nervousness that crept up inside of him whenever the cops got involved. He heard Powell thanking Graves and closing the door behind him and began to turn to face him. As he did his eyes caught familiar handwriting on one of the items on the display. The names practically taunted him. Swift, Ryan, and Taylor.

James scowled and turned away. Ignore it. He told himself. But despite his best efforts the memory of another piece of work swam to the front of his mind. A group project in elementary school. *Swift, Ryan, Taylor and Wheeler*. James gritted his teeth. He turned to the Officer.

"Thanks for your help," he was saying to the secretary and to James it sounded like a dismissal.

"Oh it's no problem. Are you're sure you don't want me to show you to Principal Coleman's office?" There was a peculiar inflection in her voice and something about the way she was acting struck James as odd. Was she...flirting with Powell?

James blinked and tried to block the image out of his head as his classmates left the room and went off to do their own thing. Some gave him gleeful smiles as they passed. Others sent looks of pity. Bianca grinned and waved. Caleb Swift smiled mournfully. James

glared back and the other boy averted his eyes to the ground, head hung and shoulders ever so slightly slumped.

"Nah, I know where it is. Thanks anyway," Powell said and began walking away, pulling James along with him for a few paces before allowing the teen to keep pace on his own.

James glanced back at the secretary and then at the very distinctly uncomfortable Powell.

"Middle aged, overweight, overly perfumed, shrill and clingy ladies with a fondness for the colour pink not your thing?"

"Shut up," came the clipped reply.

James laughed. If it sounded a little bit evil to even his own ears, he wouldn't give a second thought to it. Evil laughter was good. It was a much needed skill, James thought, especially with his particular hobbies.

Speaking of which, he still had a small issue with this entire thing. He really didn't think it fair that Bianca was getting away scot free. "Hey Cal, you know what's funny? I'm allergic to paint. Particularly spray paint. Who knew right? Guess it couldn't have been me. But Tommy isn't! She loves the stuff. You should really ask her about it,"

"Paint?" Powell asked, coming to a halt in the middle of the corridor "What the hell are you...what did you do?"

"Absolutely nothing," James looked up at him with what he hoped was an innocent expression. He was honestly surprised they weren't talking to him about their repainting of Hawkins town sign. He didn't think he'd done anything else recently. Nothing amusing at least. And of course what he thought of as 'amusing' or 'fun' was what everyone else called 'unacceptable behavior'. Hence, they wouldn't be talking to him about anything that he hadn't found fun.

Powell sighed and ran a hand over his face tiredly "Dammit kid, you two do not make our lives easy. I suppose we can expect a call from some old persons home about all their false teeth being stolen and replaced with jello models or something equally ridiculous?"

"Probably. Although I'd never target an old person's home. It just wouldn't be right."

"So you have to have some limits,"

"Nah, it'd just be too easy. No challenge. No fun."

"Of course," Powell drawled and began heading for the Principal's office again "I should have known."

"Yeah you really should have. So if not about the hypothetical retirement home then why exactly am I being dragged to the Principal's office?"

"We just need to speak with you,"

"Oh come on, Cal, throw me a bone here," he moaned, dragging his heels dramatically. "Give me a clue, at least. Let me guess; you're stealing Bianca's dog to be a police dog and need my help. You should know I'm expensive. Oh wait, eww, that makes me sound really bad,"

"Knock it off, comedian. And it's Officer Powell, not Cal. How many times I gotta tell you that?"

"Just til it sinks in I suppose,"

Before too long they rounded the corner and the office came into sight. James instantly grinned and bounded ahead, ignoring Powell, and launched himself at the door, his hand flying to the handle as he did so, intent on making a spectacular entrance and annoying the shit out of his old buddy Coleman. That, much to James' regret and humiliation, did not happen. The handle didn't turn and the door didn't open so instead of crashing into the room, James instead crashed into the door itself. He hit it heavily with his shoulder and got an instant flare of pain to accompany the loud bang he'd made. He ended up rebounding off the door and onto the floor, groaning slightly in pain. He heard Powell sigh deeply and then he was being hauled onto his feet.

"Proud of yourself?" the officer asked.

"Not really," James said sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Let's agree never to mention that to anyone. Especially Bianca."

Powell just rolled his eyes and stood near the door. James leaned against the opposite wall, wondering why the Principal wasn't in his office when he was clearly expecting James' arrival. His question was answered a few minutes later when the man himself appeared down the hall, accompanied by Officer Callaghan and Chief Hopper with...Mike, Lucas and Dustin in tow? What the fuck? James frowned. He could understand the police wanting to talk to him; although Powell had made it sound like he wasn't actually in trouble or even suspected of anything, which was vastly different to the other times he'd had to go to the station; but his brother? His nerdy little brother Mike who preferred reading comics and playing D&D in the basement than doing anything cool?

Coleman almost stumbled to a stop upon seeing the small crack running down the middle of the door and he turned to glare at James, who held his hands up in a 'not me' gesture. Coleman eyed him suspiciously for a moment before appearing to shrug it off with a soft sigh and instead turned and unlocked the door, allowing the assembled crowd inside. Mike, Lucas and Dustin sat beside each other on the sofa the Principal had in there for more personal and friendly meetings while Hopper and Callaghan took the two armchairs across from them, the latter with a notepad on his knee. Powell stayed by the door, leaning against the wall. James elected to lounge on the arm of the sofa while the Principal took his seat behind the desk. He looked concerned, which gave James a bad feeling about this meeting. He looked at his brother. Hadn't Mike been telling him about Will not being at home that morning?

He suddenly felt sick.

"Alright, we'll try and make this quick. You're all friends with Will Byers, right?" They nodded. "Okay. Have any of you seen him today?"

The question made him want to throw up. While the three on the couch shared glances between each other before answering, James remained blank faced, just staring at Hopper incomprehensibly for a moment before his eyes strayed to the side and he fixed his gaze on a point on the wall behind the officers, where the display case had

been until just before the holiday's. There was a black smudge there. Was it new or had the case been put there to hide it and it had just now been revealed? Where had it come from? How old was it? He'd rather think about that black mark on the wall than what Hopper was telling him with his questions. He'd mastered the art of hiding, though the very notion chafed against his instinctual urge to fight. James had personally found that you just had to focus on one small, innocuous detail or object; obsess over it, think about nothing else, until that one unimportant detail blocks everything else out. James was an old hand at hiding away in himself like that. He'd done it for years. He had to. The alternative was to go mad; to break and cry and rage against the world and, quite possibly, leave it all behind in the most permanent way possible. He didn't like that option. So instead he hid.

"No," Lucas said, Dustin shaking his head.

"Not since last night," Mike said. There was a pause.

"James?" he heard and after a second he realized they were talking to him. He turned his head back to Hopper. "Have you seen Will today?"

He just shook his head and tried to focus on the wall again. He could hear the others talking but he tuned it out. Hopper was asking questions. Mike and his friends were answering them. The mark on the wall might not be black, actually. Possibly a shade of brown or blue or green. Very dark, whatever it was. It had been dark last night. He'd let Will ride home on his own, even knowing how much darker it was on Mirkwood. No, James told himself, stop it, stop thinking, focus. It had probably happened when the room was being painted. A mistake with the brush, dipping it into the wrong can? A bit of wet paint on someone's sleeve as they brushed past the wall? Or maybe someone had drawn on the wall at some point. He knew Coleman had a very young nephew. Maybe the kid had been in the office at some point and drawn on the wall. Will liked to draw. Likes, James thought, he likes to draw, he's alive, he's fine. But a small voice in the back of his head wouldn't let him believe. What if he's not? it asked. What if he's not, and you could have done something?

James let out a shuddering breath and felt his hand clench into a fist, his nails digging painfully into his palms. He felt someone's eyes on

him as he stood and leaned against the window sill, eyes closed and head resting against the glass.

Behind him, he heard Hopper get frustrated with the way the three kids kept talking over each other in a jumbled mish-mash of noise that James just wanted to stop.

"Okay. Okay. Okay. One at a time, alright? You. You said he takes what?" Hopper asked and James assumed he'd singled out one of the boys to answer.

"Mirkwood," he heard Mike reply.

"Mirkwood?" Hopper asked slowly. The voices pierced James' head painfully.

"Yeah," Mike's voice was quiet and soft when he replied. There was a dull throb behind James' eyes that was nothing compared to the sharp pain that was growing in his temples.

James pressed his head against the glass a little harder, gritting his teeth. Guess he had a headache to look forward to. Remarkably unenjoyable but not unusual; not for him. He'd been getting them regularly for a good two years now, ever since 1981. Since the night his uncle died. At first he'd cried, the pain was so bad. Since then he'd learned to deal with it. Nowadays he tended to just take far too many painkillers than could possibly be healthy and tried not to strain his mind too much whenever one flared up. Not thinking tended to help. So did the cigarette's; or, when available, something stronger. But at that moment, sitting in Coleman's office, he didn't have that luxury. He didn't have any medicine on him, he couldn't smoke and he couldn't bring himself to ask for help. It didn't help that his mind was a whirlwind of activity. Will's missing. Will's missing. Will's missing. He's missing and its my fault.

"You ever heard of Mirkwood?" Hopper asks.

"I have not, that sounds made up to me," Callaghan responds.

James finally turned around, ignoring the throbbing pain behind his eyes with expertise gained by long experience and scoffed.

"That just shows your lack of culture, Officer Cottenhead," He'd been high when he first met Callaghan and had misread the man's name badge. He thought it doubled as an insult to the man's IQ quite well, so he kept using it.

"Callaghan," the officer retorts sharply before Hopper cut him off with a sharp hand movement, gesturing for James to continue.

"It's an old road coming off from where Cornwallis and Kerley meet, runs past Hawkins lab. Cuts the journey to the Byers in half. It doesn't really have a name, least not one that I've ever heard. Mirkwood's just what these nerds call it," he told them, rubbing his temples. It seemed bad today.

"It's from Lord of the Rings," Lucas said.

"Well, The Hobbit," Dustin corrected, causing the two to instantly start bickering.

"Hey, hey, hey! Knock it off," Hopper barked before turning to James "Where Cornwallis meets Kerley? Yeah I think I know it,"

"We can show you where it is," Mike offered

"I said I know where it is,"

"We can help you look for him," James closed his eyes in a different kind of pain at his brothers words.

"Yeah!" Dustin agreed and then they were all talking again, offering their help.

"No. After school you are all to go home, immediately. That means no biking around looking for your friend, no investigating, no nonsense. This isn't some...'Lord of the Rings' book."

"The Hobbit," Dustin corrected again, probably automatically. Receiving a slap on the arm from Lucas and giving one in return, while Mike sat dejectedly in between them. At home, in private, on a day where he was feeling particularly kind, he might have comforted him. Not today though. Mike could tough out some hurt feelings without James' help.

Hopper leaned forward in his chair "Do I make myself clear?" He didn't shout, he didn't raise his voice, but he was intimidating nonetheless. When no answer came, Hopper stood, his tall and broad frame looming over the kids menacingly. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir," Dustin said

"Yes sir," Mike echoed

"Yeah," Lucas offered.

Hopper turned to him. He was leaning against the window sill again. He knew that Hopper was waiting for an answer but he couldn't give one. He loved it when Cottenhead or Cal was the one he had to deal with. He couldn't lie to Hopper to his immense frustration.

He deflected instead "Do y-" he could himself off, hating how broken his voice sounded as his throat choked up on him. He felt Mike's incredulous stare on him at the aborted show of emotion. He coughed, cleared his throat "Do you think he's alive?"

Hopper sighed before replying "We don't know much of anything yet, we're still investigating,"

James snarled and slammed a hand down on the window sill, making the kids, Cottenhead and Coleman jump. Even Powell flinched a little. "Don't bullshit me Hopper, is he alive!"

"HEY! Calm down!" Hopper said sternly. Mike, Lucas and Dustin had sunk back into their seats.

James just glared at him, hoping to prompt an actual answer. Hopper glared back, and the weight of his gaze was heavy. Their eyes stayed locked on the others for five seconds, then ten. Both angry, both furious and both stubborn. Twenty seconds. James looked away. Hopper sighed and with that it was over. Hopper and the officers had their questions answered and left, going to check out Mirkwood. James had gotten the answers to questions he hadn't even wanted to ask. Hadn't been brave enough to ask. Will was missing. Little Will Byers, who always had a smile wider than the Grand Canyon whenever he presented some expertly drawn picture to Mike. Will,

who always made sure to save some food and a space around the D&D board for him in case he ever decided to join in. Will, who'd learned how to make mixtapes from Jonathan just to give him one for a present last Christmas. Will who'd already been through enough.

As he watched the police cars drive away, James made his choice. To hell with Hopper and to hell with his orders. Will could be hurt and he was going to help, whether a grumpy old police chief liked it or not. With that thought, he waited until the cars were out of sight, waited until they'd be far enough ahead that he wouldn't catch up and then ran to front of the school, deftly ignoring Cal's admirer as he stormed through the front doors and pulled his bike out of the bike rack. He wheeled it to the front gate and then hopped on, biking down the path and turning onto the road without so much as slowing down for the turn. He pedaled as fast as he could. He'd have to avoid Mirkwood. The cops would be there and then they'd just take him back to school.

No, he'd take the long way around. The way he should probably have insisted Will go.

The pain in his head was still there and it was a pretty effective distraction. More than once James had to slow down or even pedal over to the side of the road and break to a stop in an effort to relieve the pounding for just a minute or two before biking off toward the Byers house again and at one point he ended up drifting in front of a car and had to swerve sharply just to avoid being splattered across the road. He ended up scraped and aching by the side of the road, his bike awkwardly lying across his legs. He chose to lie there for a few minutes before picking himself up again, his arm stinging something awful and knowing he'd cut his face up quite badly. But even with those setbacks it didn't take long before he was turning onto the long dirt path that led up to the Byers house. Not more than half an hour, at the most, but without a working watch he couldn't be sure.

Within another minute he was knocking on the Byers front door, and hoping that one of them was in.

His luck paid off.

"James? Oh my God, are you alright? What happened?" Joyce asked as soon as she saw him.

James smiled sheepishly "Hi, Mrs. Byers. I, er, fell off my bike. It wasn't my proudest moment," he shrugged and then stepped inside as she opened the door. "I heard about Will. How are you two holding up?"

She looked scared and worried and angry. That much was obvious. It was in the way she kept glancing at the pictures of Will they had in the house and tears would appear in the corner of her eyes. The way she fiddled with the ends of her sleeves and picked at threads on the hem of her jumper; the slight shake in her hands; the sharp, jittery movements she made and the way her eyes kept flicking to the doors as though she expected Will to walk through one of them at any moment. But despite it all she still seemed strong. There was something in her eyes; a fire, a determination, a fierceness; that said she hadn't given up yet and wasn't going to any time soon. It was impressive. Inspiring almost. James had nothing but the highest respect for this woman before; she was doing nothing but prove it was deserved.

"We're coping," she said eventually "We're doing about as well as can be expected, all things considered,"

James hated the way her voice got weaker and sadder and so much more broken up by the end of her sentence.

"Hey," he said. "Don't worry about it. Will's strong; stronger than people think. He'll be fine. We're gonna find him. I promise."

Mrs. Byers smiled slightly and pulled him into a hug and then she was shooing him further into the house and pointing him towards the bathroom, as though he hadn't been there a million times before.

"Okay, go get yourself cleaned up. They look like they hurt. There's alcohol wipes and band aids in the bathroom, you know where they are," she said. "And James; we will be talking about you skipping school, you hear me?"

There was a fond smile on her face so he snapped his heels together

and saluted, knowing he could get away with the dramatics and jokes and desperately wanting to keep her spirits lifted even if only a little.

"Yes Ma'am," he said in a bad mimic of a marine, before turning and heading towards the bathroom. He couldn't help but wince at the pain that flared up everytime he turned his wrist. He'd landed on it badly when he fell and it had steadily been getting worse ever since.

James came to stop as Jonathan stepped into the hall, closing Will's door behind him before noticing the younger boy's presence. He was holding a pen and some paper. James gave him a small smile that Jonathan tried, and failed, to return. James couldn't help but notice that the older boy looked awful. There were dark circles around his eyes and he looked even paler than he usually did. Tired and worried about Will. James could relate.

"Hey, man," James said.

"Hey James," Jonathan replied "What are you doing here? Thought you were in school today?"

"I ditched. Figured I should be here, you know. Help out; look for him or...or whatever else you need,"

"Oh," he said quietly, looking down and fiddling with the paper he held in his hands and then looked over at him with a frown. "What happened to you? Did you get in another fight?"

"Nothing that fun. I, erm, fell off my bike on the way here," James flushed with embarrassment "Your mom said I could use your bathroom to get cleaned up,"

"Oh, right," Jonathan said and allowed him to step passed. James paused before he continued down the hall.

"This is real, isn't it? This is actually happening?" Jonathan just nodded "I just...God, I just can't believe it. This is Hawkins! Shit like this doesn't happen here; not to people like Will."

"I know what you mean," he said. He glanced down at the paper and pen in his hands "I'm making a missing persons poster for him. But...I don't know, it's like it hasn't sunk in yet. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I do," there was silence for a moment, "I'll see you in a few minutes, Jonathan. I can help you...I don't know. Find a good picture or something,"

James entered the bathroom and closed door behind him before glancing in the mirror. He frowned and pursed his lips. It wasn't too bad, going by his standards. The dirt and blood made it look worse than it was. The right side of his face was covered by a few shallow cuts and scrapes across his cheek and around his eye. His right sleeve was filthy but still intact except for a badly frayed and ripped area on his elbow that was covered in blood. Sighing, James set to work. It took him a while to work his jacket off, having to very gently remove his arm from the sleeve. His right wrist ached and stung and flared with pain whenever he jostled it too much. It wasn't broken. He could still move it a little and knew the feel of a broken bone well enough to know that this wasn't the case. Probably just twisted. Sprained at the worst. That didn't make it hurt any less of course. It was already purpling and starting to swell. The rest of his arm was in better shape. There was a large cut on his elbow that was bleeding quite a lot, but that was the worst of it. Beyond that there was just a couple of scratches and grazes. The small sting that accompanied them was barely noticeable.

James focused on the cut first and then his wrist. He was fairly experienced at treating injuries. He had to be, with the 'extra-circular activities' he and Bianca were involved with in Indianapolis. He made quick work of cleaning the cut with one of the wipes Mrs. Byers kept handy and covering the wound with a band aid before expertly wrapping some bandages around his wrist. After that it was easy work washing his face and arm, cleaning the blood and dirt off and then using a swab of cotton and some cleaning alcohol to clean the cuts, just to be safe. It stung a little but he'd had a lot worse in his time. He picked up a bottle of advil and shook out a couple of the small pills, choking them down with water from the sink.

He was making sure he hadn't left any marks or blood in the sink when he heard an angry bellow of 'Bitch!' from the next room. James raised an eyebrow, despite no one being present to see the questioning look before turning back to the sink and shutting off the tap. Definitely not a woman he wanted to piss off. Before he left,

James glanced in the mirror once more. The bruise on his cheek looked pretty bad now but it would fade quickly enough. Within a few days there wouldn't be any trace of it left at all. The scrape across his cheek was thin and the one on his jaw was barely noticeable. The worst of them was a large cut around his eye but even that was quite a shallow wound.

The last mark he caught sight of was the scar on the left side of his face, and seeing it made him frown just like it did every other time he saw it.

Two years old and he still wasn't used to it. It was a long, ugly thing. Running from just beside his ear down to the edge of his jaw, below the corner of his mouth, he'd had it ever since the day his uncle had been murdered. It was one of his clearest memories of that night; something hard and heavy, and from the feel of it most probably metal, connecting solidly with his face and sending him to the ground in a crumpled mess. He never knew for sure what hit him. The police had found a crowbar with his uncles fingerprints on it near the scene. They figured he'd tried to fight off his attacker and in the darkness had caught his nephew by accident. Or the attacker had wrenched it off him and used it. But there was no official story. James' testimony had been of no help in piecing events together and it remained a mystery even now.

James picked up his jacket and left the bathroom. Despite how insanely badass it made him look, James honestly hated that scar. It had gotten him stared at a lot when he came back to school with it a few weeks after he received it, most of them looks of pity. God he'd hated that.

He entered the kitchen just in time to see Mrs. Byers yell at the phone.

"Dammit! Dammit!" she screamed. Each shout was punctuated by the phone being slammed back onto the receiver with quite a bit of force. With a sigh, she stepped away from the phone and put a hand over her eyes.

"Mom?" Jonathan voice came from another room as James placed his jacket over the back of a chair.

"What?" She asked

"Cops,"

James blanched and his eyes darted to the front door. Now that Jonathan mentioned it he could faintly hear the sound of cars driving up the path. He had no issues disobeying Hopper, or anyone else for that matter not least his own parents. He would be involved in the search for Will whether the police liked it or not. That said, Hopper was one of the few people in the town who could intimidate him into submission and he hadn't expected to have to face up to his decision so soon. As Mrs. Byers and Jonathan both rushed to the front door, James took a deep breath and moved to where he could see the front door more easily, leaning back against the table.

The pair were only gone for a few moments. James listened out for excited cries and exuberant yells but heard nothing. He figured the absolute silence from beyond the door meant that Hopper hadn't found Will safe and sound somewhere and felt his heart sink a bit lower. He supposed he must have still been hoping for that, somehow, in contrast to his usual cynicism. He did faintly hear some quiet voices. Two of them, male and female, though he couldn't make out what was being said.

Jonathan stepped back inside first, looking even more dejected than he had before. James tried to catch his eye. He failed.

"Jonathan?" he asked, the rest of the question left unspoken. Jonathan knew what he wanted to know.

"It was his bike," he said. "Just his bike."

Nothing more needed to be said.

A moment later Joyce stepped inside again, wringing her hands nervously, with Callaghan and Powell right behind her. The two officers came to a dead stop just inside the doorway when they caught sight of him standing in the Byers kitchen and he couldn't help but force himself to grin ever so slightly and wave at them. The pair glanced at each other and held the stare for a short moment. Callaghan just shook his head after a second and Powell shrugged. He

guessed they were just going to leave it to Hopper, who entered the doorway only a second later and like his deputy's before him, stopped in his tracks. In an instant the neutral expression he was wearing was gone and unhidden anger replaced it as he ground his jaw clenched and he glared with eyes that were cold and hard. But behind that James noticed Hopper's gaze scanning over his face and arm. Call him crazy, but impossibly there seemed to be a hint of concern behind the anger.

"What happened to going home immediately after school? I told you no getting involved and less than an hour later you've ditched school and done exactly that!" the Chief asked, his voice low.

"Will's my friend. The second he went missing I was involved. I'm not just gonna sit at home and pretend everything's fine while he could be out there. I'm helping; with or without your permission," James retorted

Hopper glared for a few seconds and then sighed "You know, if I didn't know better I'd haul your ass back to school myself. Or better yet your parents house. But I know you'd just leave again the second I was gone."

It took a second for the words to register. When they did, James felt like shouting in victory. That had been a lot easier than he thought. The deputy's looked bewildered at the Chief's quite easy, if reluctant, acceptance.

"So...you're saying I can stay?"

"You can stay," Hopper said tiredly "At least if you're here me or Joyce can keep an eye on you. Better than you running around doing things on your own. You couldn't have even waited 'til after school to disobey me?"

"Sorry. I'm impulsive like that," James shrugged. At Hopper's unimpressed look, he continued "Look, one of my closest friends is missing. That's much more important than school. Besides, three minute records teach me more about the world than I've ever learned in school,"

"Don't quote Springsteen at me," he said dryly.

"Sorry,"

"Hopper!" Mrs. Byers said urgently. "Can we focus please? James skipping school can wait. Will's bike. It was just lying there?"

"Yeah. Cal," Hopper nodded and motioned to one of the other rooms, motioning for Powell to look around in there. Hopper began to move further into the house, Mrs. Byers and Jonathan trailing after him. James straightened and moved to the side to allow Hopper to enter the kitchen.

"Did it have any blood on it, or...?" Mrs. Byers asked and James' eyes moved to Hopper, waiting for the answer.

"No, no, no, no, no, no." James released a breath he didn't know he was holding. "Phil."

Hopper gestured down the hallway that housed the bedrooms and the bathroom and Cottenhead abandoned his brief search of the living room to start searching down there. Hopper stepped around James and into the kitchen.

"If you found the bike out there, why are you in here?"

"Well he had a key to the house didn't he?"

"Yeah," Jonathan said.

"So...maybe he came home," he said, moving over to the window and glancing outside, his knuckles wrapping against the counter.

"Wha- Y-You, you think I didn't check my own house?" Mrs. Byers asked incredulously.

Hopper moved over to the back door and paused, his eyes locked on something on the wall. James followed his eyes and found himself staring at a splintered chip in the wall. James frowned. That was new.

"I didn't say that," he said. His hand went to the mark and ran his

fingers over it. "Has this always been here?"

"What? I don't know. Probably, I mean I have two boys. Look at this place," Mrs. Byers answered.

"No," James cut in immediately after, making Hopper turn to him inquisitively. "Remember when we had that water fight, about two weeks back?"

"You mean when you and Bianca decided it would be fun to drench Mike and Will with water balloons? Yeah, what about it?"

"Well, every time we came in side to get more ammo, that door would go flying open. Will kept telling us to be careful because we'd put a hole through the wall and eventually we just propped it open. It wasn't there then."

Hopper pulled the door open and pushed it as far as it would go. There was a slightly pointed piece on the door knob that matched perfectly with the damaged part of the wall, though it would have taken quite a bit of force to actually chip the wood. Hopper looked up from the door and between the three of them, a slight lift to his eyebrow. James put together his thought process fairly quickly.

Will's bike left by the road. Back door recently thrown open with force. No Will. Conclusion = Something scared him, he left his bike, ran home and then...left out the back. But why would he leave the house once he reached it?

"If he was scared enough to abandon his bike, why leave the house once he was inside?" he was looking at Hopper.

"He still didn't feel safe, I guess," Hopper said.

"So you think he went outside again?" Mrs. Byers asked "That doesn't make sense Hop, why would he feel safer out there than in here."

Her words sparked something in James' head. "The rifle. You keep it in the shed,"

Hopper glanced out the back window, presumably at the shed before looking back at him.

"You think he went for the gun?"

James shrugged "It's what I'd do," he said.

Hopper nodded and stepped outside. James made to follow him and he was aware of Mrs. Byers doing the same. James' jacket was still inside so the cool air sent chills up his arms as he stepped outside. He crossed his arms across his chest to try and abate the feeling. Hopper stopped to examine the shed for a moment before striding towards it. Mrs. Byers hung back at Hopper's signal to wait but James followed. The Chief glanced back at him as he approached, before looking forward again.

"I guess it'd be a waste of time to tell you to wait in the house?"

"You know it," James replied cockily.

Hopper regarded him closely for a second before responding. "Fine, but if I'm letting you do this, then we're doing it carefully. And that means that when I say do something, you do it. Deal?"

"Swear you're not gonna try and cut me out?"

"I promise, kid, now do we have a deal? You're gonna follow my orders?"

James considered the offered hand and then reached out and shook. "Deal," he said.

"Okay," Hopper nodded and began to push open the shed door, "First order; stay behind me."

"Yes boss," James said as they entered.

It was dark inside. Like, pitch black. The only light was streaming in through the gaps in between the wooden planks that made up the shed door and the old, dirt stained window. It didn't illuminate the inside of the building in any way. James was aware of Hopper just ahead of him only by his breathing. James suddenly wished they'd brought a torch. Almost instantly, the light hanging in the middle of the room lit up. Glancing to his left, he saw Hopper's hand moving away from the switch before the man started moving forwards, James

only a step behind, both of them glancing around the room. Hopper strayed towards the table and began glancing over the objects on it. He stopped at the far end and picked something up. James saw a box in his hand and heard the sound of bullets rolling around. More of the small brass objects were scattered across the work bench, as though someone had been in a hurry when they opened the box and had spilled the bullets everywhere.

Hopper placed the box of bullets back on the table and moved over to the space on the wall, where the rifle used to sit. It was empty. Hopper stepped up to it and then turned and looked back to James, who nodded. Yes, that's were the gun used to be. Hopped nodded and then started examining it, closely. For what purpose, James didn't know. It was pretty obvious that the rifle was gone. All of a sudden, the light cut out. James snapped back towards the switch, expecting to see someone there in the doorway having turned it off. But there was no one. James felt a shiver run down his back and the hairs on his neck stood on end. He stepped back slightly and his foot connected with something heavy on the floor, that made a slight scratching noise as it was moved across the wooden surface.

Frowning, James knelt down. He was aware of Hopper doing something somewhere behind him. He wasn't sure what, though from the sudden flash of light in the corner of his vision, he guessed that Hopper had picked up a flashlight. His eyes rapidly adjusting to the dark, James reached out for the object he had kicked and found himself grasping the barrel of a rifle. Carefully, and making sure to keep the barrel pointed away from himself and the Chief, James pulled the rest of the gun out from where it was buried beneath several collapsed crates.

Curious, he pulled the magazine and glanced at it. Loaded. Fully loaded by the look of it. He turned to Hopper, finding him kneeling in front of a broken box, shining the flashlight inside.

"Hopper," he said, getting his attention.

The Chief stood and turned the flashlight beam onto him. It strayed down until it landed on the gun in his lap.

"Loaded?" he asked simply.

"Yeah," James said in reply, handing him the rifle and magazine. "Someone loaded it; someone who knew where to find it and where the bullets were,"

Hopper was examining the rifle closely. "It also hasn't been fired," he said eventually.

James frowned "So whatever he was running from caught up," he said "And either chased him off or took him before he could fire?"

"Looks like it," Hopper murmured, glancing back at the box he'd been looking at a moment earlier.

There was silence for a minute and then...

"Hey!" they heard just as the light flashed back on, making James nearly jump out of his skin and Hopper spin around in a panic.

"Je-sus!" he drawled breathlessly.

James turned around to see Cottenhead standing in the doorway.

"What are you deaf? I've been calling you," he said before glancing to the space Hopper had been looking at. "What's going on?"

With a sigh Hopper pushed passed and left the shed, James following behind with only a single comment.

"You're a dick, man," he said as he made his way outside.

Powell joined them as they made their way back to the house, Cottenhead asking if they were okay or something before Hopper, thankfully, cut him off.

"Listen I want you to call Flo, wanna get a search party together alright? All the volunteers she can muster. Bring flashlights," he ordered.

"Volunteer number one, at your service, Chief," James offered, voice entirely sincere. Hopper paused and studied him for a moment, seeming to hesitate for a second. James jumped in before he could say no "We had a deal, remember? You let me help, I do what you

tell me,"

Hopper nodded slightly "Yeah, okay," he said, though it was clear he was still extremely reluctant. James felt honoured. Had it been any other kid, he didn't doubt for a second that Hopper would have flat out refused. "Fine; head back to your place, get something warm and a flashlight and come meet us at the station when you're ready,"

"Yes, boss,"

It was hours later before he met up with Hopper again. After looking around at the Byers house, Hopper and the deputy's had left to go and start organizing things for the search party. James had stuck around for a while, helping the Byers family out in whatever way he could before heading back home, wheeling his bike this time instead of riding it; last thing he needed was another near-death experience, even if the headache had been somewhat numbed by the painkillers he took at the Byers house.

Hopper and Flo had been quick in their work. By the time James had made it home word had already spread that Will Byers was officially missing and that a search party was being formed. Any volunteers were to meet outside the police station at four thirty that afternoon.

His mother had been surprised to see him home so early and probably assumed he'd gotten a lift back from Mr. Tomlinson...until He responded to her question by telling that he'd skipped when he heard Will was missing, spent the afternoon helping the out at Will's house and that he wasn't staying long because the Chief said he could join the search party and that he had to get ready. She'd shouted after him, but he didn't stop. Instead, he darted into his bedroom, pulling his t-shirt off, throwing it into the corner and pulling a new(ish) one on instead. He knew they'd be out late so he pulled on a jumper and a different coat; his jacket was still at Will's house, Mrs. Byers had made him leave it their for her to wash. He supposed she wanted something to do.

The last thing he'd done before leaving was to run into his brothers room and grab his flashlight.

He'd avoided his mother easily; he went out the back; and decided to

leave his back at home, walking over to the station instead. It was nearly time to leave by the time he got there, and there was a sizeable crowd waiting to begin the search. James had jockeyed his way through and was waiting by the front door when Hopper left the station. He'd been told to wait there while Hopper gave instructions out to gathered crowd of volunteers before being told that he was to be right next to Hopper the whole time they were out there. James accepted that instruction graciously.

That had been hours ago. Night had since fallen, given the woods they were searching a distinctly eerie feel to them. James had been told that he wasn't allowed more than three feet away from Hopper, so that the Chief could 'keep an eye on him' and was therefore grateful that Hopper was right at the front. He would have felt cheated to be anywhere else. There was a long line of people to both his left and right, carrying flashlights and calling Will's name, over and over again in the hopes that he might hear them. James thought they were being overly optimistic. Will had been missing twenty four hours at this point. It was doubtful that Will was somewhere he could hear them; that didn't stop him from doing the exact same though.

"Will!" he shouted over and over and over again, his light scanning from side to side, looking for something; anything; that might give them a clue to his whereabouts.

"He's a good student," he heard from behind him, and glanced behind to see Mr. Clarke, his brothers favorite teacher, drawing level with Hopper.

"What?" Hopper asked.

"Will," the teacher said "He's a good student. Great one actually. I don't think we've met. Scott Clarke, teacher at Hawkins Middle; earth and biology," he offered his hand to Hopper. James faced forwards and kept walking, half listening to the conversation going on behind him.

"I always had a distaste for science,"

"Well, maybe you had a bad teacher,"

"Yeah, Ms. Ratliff was a piece of work," Hopper chuckled.

"Ratliff? You bet," Clarke laughed slightly "She's still kicking around believe it or not,"

"Oh I believe it. Mummies never die, so they tell me," There was a pause "Sarah, my daughter...galaxies, Universe and whatnot; she always understood all that stuff. I always figured there was enough going on down here, I never needed to look elsewhere,"

"Your daughter, what grade is she? Maybe I'll get her in my class,"

"No, she, uh, she lives with her mom in the city. Thanks for coming out, Teach. We really appreciate it," James heard Hopper increase his pace and a second later he had overtaken him and moved off ahead.

"She died a few years back," he heard a woman say and James almost stumbled. He knew Hopper had a daughter. He hadn't known she'd died.

"Sorry?" Clarke asked

"His kid," the woman said.

James glanced up at Hopper, slightly ahead of the group now. He hadn't thought he would take Will's disappearance seriously and had been surprised when he was wrong. Now he knew why Hopper was so dedicated to this case.

James respected the man, though, and he didn't think he'd appreciate people knowing stuff he obviously didn't want to remember. James walked a bit quicker and caught up with Hopper. Three feet was the rule. He'd keep it. Best behavior, snarky comments aside. But on the matter of Hopper's daughter, he'd keep his silence.

Like I said at the top, I'm not 100% sure about this one. But it's finished and it's been long enough without an update so I'll put it out there and hope you enjoy it. If you do, please drop leave a like or a review.